

Spare a thought for the Boston Brahmins in the mid-19th century.

The Protestant Englishmen who settled Boston eventually established the same kind of hierarchical society they had professed to despise when they sailed away on the Mayflower. The wealthiest of these so-called Brahmins settled on Beacon Hill, the pinnacle of the city on a hill. It took a couple of hundred years, but just as they had got their city ordered just so, the potato crop failed in Ireland and everything was turned upside down.

The Irish began arriving by the boatload, unwashed, uneducated, diseased, drunken, and perhaps worst of all to the sensibilities of those in the stately brownstones of Beacon Hill, Catholic. Because you could wash them, give them medicine, provide a free and public education, but at the end of the day the Irish were still a bunch of hard-drinking Papists, taking their orders from some Italian guy in Rome.

The Famine Irish, including those who headed north to work in the mills in Lowell and Lawrence, didn't have it easy. They were openly discriminated against. The politicians of the day didn't care much for the new immigrants - sound familiar? - so the Irish decided to elect their own.

The Irish pol became something of a standard, if not a stereotype, demanding unflinching loyalty in return for jobs and favors. The Irish became the dominant ethnic groups in Boston and Lowell and Lawrence, and Irish ward bosses protected their turf like pit bulls.

James Michael Curley, who became the most celebrated and notorious of Irish pols, established his bona fides with his constituents by taking a civil service exam for an Irish immigrant. The Brahmins were horrified; the Irish and Italians and Eastern Europeans who would become his core voters loved the guy.

Curley would actually go to jail for impersonating someone else, but as a political act it was worth the time. The good government types were so appalled by Curley's antics that after he became mayor of Boston for the first of four terms, the gentle women of Beacon Hill and Back Bay descended into the working class enclaves of Charlestown and South Boston, to promote reform candidates - read, Brahmins - who would beat back the Irish political machine.

Legend has it that one of these gentle ladies knocked on a door in Southie, and was greeted by an Irishwoman holding a wash bucket. The nice lady from Beacon Hill asked the woman of the house to consider voting for her brother, one of the reformers taking on the Curley machine. When the woman of the house asked if her brother would be giving her a job if he won, the gentle lady from Beacon Hill was aghast. "Absolutely not," she insisted. "That would be improper."

The lady of the house sniffed, turned up her nose and said, "Why would I vote for a guy who wouldn't give his own sister a job?"

Eventually, the Irish political machine, like all machines, became obsessed not with serving constituents as much as maintaining power. Even as the Irish took over the police, the fire, and even the boardrooms, Curley and his ilk talked as if they were MOPES: the most oppressed people ever.

The Irish pol had to figure out how to appeal well beyond his base. It has taken more than a generation for this phenomenon to take hold, and the definition of an Irish pol has undergone a massive transformation. It has less to do with race and religion, more to do with sensibilities and culture.

One of the most successful Irish pols in Boston is a woman named Linda Dorcena Forry. She's the daughter of Haitian immigrants, married to a guy from one of the biggest Irish-American clans in Dorchester. As the state senator that represents Dorchester and South Boston, she presides over the annual St. Patrick's Day brunch, and the truth is Linda can belt out "Wild Colonial Boy" with the best of them.

One of the last Irish ward bosses was a guy named Willie Lantigua, who ran Lawrence the way James Michael Curley ran Boston. Lantigua treated government like his own personal

fiefdom, and characterized his most ethically dubious acts as merely the paternalistic actions of a man who took care of his put-upon constituents. When anyone dared to question his cronyism, he dismissed it as an attack on Dominicans, the new MOPES.

The best illustration of the evolution of the Irish pol is seen in the two Martys - Marty O'Malley, the governor of Maryland, and Marty Walsh, the mayor of Boston. O'Malley's political rise began in Baltimore, when he was able to build a coalition of minority voters who saw him not as the white Irish guy, but the guy who cared about them. The same happened in Boston, where minority voters saw in Marty Walsh not a typical Irish pol but a union guy who helped minorities get into the trades, a neighborhood guy who lived in a neighborhood where most people are not white.

When I talk to Marty O'Malley and Marty Walsh, they don't sound like Irish pols. They sound like urban pols, politicians sophisticated enough, and genuine enough, to know that being Irish is just one of many things, not the only thing, that makes you electable.

Which makes me wonder, why do guys named Marty get this stuff so intuitively?

CUT TO MARTY MEEHAN;

That's because, in Irish, the name is Mairtin, from the Roman god Mars, a protector. Martys are protectors.

FINAL CUT TO ME:

(fold arms)

Show off.